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In 1938, a group of researchers at Harvard University set out to understand scientifically what makes humans happy.

Beginning with a group of young men in Boston, they initiated the Harvard Study of Adult Development.

All these decades later, the study is still going strong.

It's now the longest in-depth, longitudinal study of human life ever done.

Something unique in the history of science.

Robert Waldinger is the fourth director of the study.

He's also professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a Zen priest.

And with his colleague, Mark Schultz,

Bob has written a book that aims to distill the lessons that Harvard researchers have learned about how to live.

It's called The Good Life.

Lessons from the world's longest study on happiness.

Hi, Bob.

Hi.

Take me back to Harvard in 1938.

What was the idea that these researchers had?

Actually, there were two studies that didn't know about each other because Harvard is kind of big and spread out.

So one study was of a group of Harvard University students, 19-year-old young men who were thought by their deans to be fine-upstanding specimens.

And it was meant to be a study of normal young adult development.

So of course, if we want to study normal young adult development, we study all white men from Harvard, right?

And so we've since expanded that.

But the other study was also a study of normal development, of thriving, but it was started at Harvard Law School

and it was started alongside a group of juvenile delinquents.

There was a group of boys from Boston's poorest neighborhoods and most disadvantaged families.

And the question was how do these children, born into such difficult circumstances, stay on good developmental paths?

And so it was a study of thriving, but also of resilience, essentially.

And what predicts who's going to do well?

What kinds of questions were these young men asked?

Well, they were given lengthy psychological exams, including how they felt about life, how they felt about themselves, but they asked sometimes random questions.

Everyone was asked was, are you ticklish?
We still don't know why they asked that question.
The investigators must have been thinking about something.
So they had these lengthy psychological interviews.
They also had physical exams.
And then they went to their homes and they interviewed their parents
and sometimes their grandparents.
And we have these wonderful notes from the home visits
about what was being served for dinner
and what the disciplinary style was in the home
and even what the decor was like in the home.
How unusual was that at the time,
that kind of rich texture of the detail of their everyday lives?
It was totally unusual.
It still is.
The kind of in-depth study that we have on these 724 families
is unheard of.
And so the agreement was that this group of young men
would be questioned repeatedly,
that again and again they would agree to answer
the questions of the Harvard psychologists.
Well, no one dreamed that the study would be going on for 85 years.
Everyone thought it might go for 5 or 10 years.
And in fact, most longitudinal studies stop before the 10-year mark
because too many people drop out.
And so the original investigators would never have dreamed
that I would be sitting here today telling you
about a study that we're still collecting information for.
Are they asked the same questions every time they visited?
A few of the same questions, yes,
because repeating the same questions turns out to be
a very powerful way to look at change across time.
But then we also add new questions.
So for example, right now,
we are asking questions of the second generation,
all the children of these original people.
And we're asking them about their experience
during the COVID lockdown.
We're asking them about their social media use.
Now those questions we would never have asked in 1938.
All they cared about was are you ticklish or not back in 1938.
Exactly, exactly, exactly.
How else did the study expand in the early 2000s?
Well, we are, as you were saying in the introduction,

we are sort of a history of science.
So we now draw blood for DNA.
DNA wasn't imagined in 1938.
We put people into the MRI scanner
and watch how their brains light up
when we show them different kinds of pictures.
And women have even crept in to this study.
Oh, yes, women have crept in.
So when I started, we brought in all the wives,
many of whom said, you know,
it is about time you brought us in
because they were serving tea to our interviewers
when they came to their homes.
And so we brought in all the wives
and then all the children,
1300 plus children,
more than half of whom are women.
Initially, all of this information
would have, of course, been recorded by hand.
Where are all those documents kept?
Well, they were kept at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston
in a great big file room
with 25, five drawer file cabinets.
Now they are archived in the Harvard repository
at the Institute for Quantitative Social Sciences
for posterity.
But we have everything scanned.
So all of these hundreds of thousands of pieces of paper
now fit on a thumb drive.
What was it like for you the first time
you took a look through those files?
Well, my predecessor, George Valiant,
took me out to lunch one day
and said, how would you like to inherit
the Harvard study of adult development?
And I dropped my jaw and I said, well, I don't know.
And so he said, come to the office
and just read through a couple of files.
So he put these great big files
that sat like maybe three feet high on my desk
and I sat there one day
and simply flipped through and I could read
what someone said about their life as a 19-year-old
and then what they said about their experience

as a soldier in World War II
and then what they said about being 45 years old
and raising a family and I just got hooked.
I just got totally hooked and I said, I'm in.
Are there photographs as well, Pope?
There are some photographs and in fact
we had a reunion of the inner city boys
at a luncheon in 2005
and when they came in they said,
you're not gonna show those pictures of me
in my underwear when I was 12, are you?
So they took pictures of body
because they thought that your body habitus,
your body shape and your skull shape
predicted your personality, your intelligence.
Now we know that's not true.
So we have photographs, we have elaborate skull measurements.
If you know anybody who'd like to analyze
a set of elaborate skull measurements,
they're welcome to them.
You're the guy to ask.
It must be like reading through a real life novel
as you flicker back through someone's life.
It must be like, don't marry that person
or do take that job.
It is because we know how the story's gonna come out.
What happens to your sense of time
as you look through somebody's file?
Well, you realize how short life is
because you're sitting there looking at a life
passed before your eyes.
That's such a rare privilege,
but it also makes me realize how short life is.
And it made, so for example,
my wife and I had to decide,
were we gonna take three weeks off to come to Australia?
And Jennifer was saying,
oh, I can't leave my practice.
She's a psychologist.
And then I said, look,
we don't have that many more years
when we're gonna be healthy.
That's a perspective that I get
from studying all these lives.

I also get it from my Zen practice,
which also gives you that perspective about life and death.
So valuable.
President John F. Kennedy has a file there.
Why is that?
Well, he was one of the Harvard undergraduates.
Long before he ever dreamed he was gonna become president,
he volunteered to sign up for this study.
Now, he withdrew from the study
when he was running for Senate,
when he was in his 30s,
because his advisors said,
you don't wanna leave all this personal information
in some research office somewhere.
You don't want this photos of you and your undies.
Yeah.
John.
That's right.
So his records are now in the Kennedy Library
at the University of Massachusetts.
The only reason I can tell you his name
is because someone else, a journalist,
outed him in public, in a publication.
Otherwise, we keep the identities
of our research participants completely confidential,
so that even in the book,
the stories of real lives, they're totally real,
but the details are changed
so that they can't be identified.
The study is billed as the world's longest study on happiness.
What's understood by that term happiness in the study?
Well, the one thing we understand
is that one size never fits all
when you study thousands of lives.
So research has begun to kind of sketch out
some big buckets of happiness,
so there are flavors of happiness.
And two of them are very prominent now in research.
One is called hedonic well-being.
It comes from hedonism,
and it's just,
am I having a good time right now?
Am I having a good time talking with you?
And yes, by the way, I am, right?

But something really annoying may happen an hour from now,
and I may not be happy, right?
That's the moment-to-moment happiness,
hedonic well-being.
Then there's eudaimonic well-being.
It comes from the Greek,
and it refers to that sense that my life is basically good,
that my life has meaning.
That is a more long-term sense of happiness.
And that second understanding of happiness,
it sounds like it's got space for sadness,
for ups and downs in our experience.
Yes, there's actually a good example of the difference.
So a mom gave it to me.
She was reading to her little daughter to get her to go to sleep,
and she was reading a children's book,
and she'd read the book like five times,
and her daughter was saying,
mommy, read it one more time, read it again.
And the mom was saying,
you know, was I having a good time at that point?
No, I was exhausted, I'd had a long day.
Was this the most meaningful thing I could do with my time?
Absolutely.
So that's the difference between eudaimonic well-being
and hedonic well-being.
I've heard psychologists talk about the hedonic-adaption theory.
Yes.
What does that mean?
Well, we talk about being on a hedonic treadmill,
and what it means is that we all have kind of a basic set point
of happiness.
You probably know people who are cheerful all the time,
almost no matter what's happening,
and you probably know other people who are gloomy all the time, right?
And it tends to be that we're all born with a basic temperament
of kind of more or less cheerfulness or gloominess.
And then what they find is that even when good or bad things
happen to us, we return to that baseline level.
So they did a study of lottery winners,
and people who had a terrible accident were paralyzed and wheelchair bound.
And they found that those people,
both the lottery winners and the wheelchair people,
were returned to their basic level of happiness a year after the big event.

It's extraordinary.

It seems so counterintuitive.

So what we imagine is going to change our life permanently for good or for bad.

Exactly.

Tell me about one of the men in the study who is known as Leo DeMarco, who the study began talking to back in 1946.

What sort of life did Leo have?

Well, Leo was thought by my predecessor.

He was interviewed by my predecessor when Leo was in his 40s, and my predecessor came back saying,

this is probably one of the most boring men in the study.

Now we think he was almost certainly the happiest man and probably the best adjusted.

So now let me tell you about Leo.

So Leo was a Harvard student, and then he went off to serve in World War II, as all of them did.

He came back and he wanted to be a writer.

He wanted to be a journalist.

But his mother was ill, so he had to come back home and take care of his mother, and he needed a job.

So he got a job teaching high school students, teaching history.

He stayed in that job his whole career, 40 plus years.

It turned out he loved teaching history.

He loved his students.

He loved his colleagues.

He had a warm marriage, three daughters.

His greatest pleasure in retirement was teaching his grandchildren to sail on the sailboat that he had built as a young man.

So here was this man whose big dream was never realized, but he had warm relationships.

He enjoyed his work.

He enjoyed his family.

He had hobbies he loved, and he was our happiest man.

He wasn't wealthy.

He wasn't famous.

Did he think of himself as happy?

I think he thought of himself as very fortunate.

He loved his wife.

He had a solid relationship.

I think he felt that life had been good to him.

He didn't dwell on the fact that he never realized that career dream of his.

So Leo is in the happy category.

What about participants whose trajectories aren't so rosy?

What examples come to mind?

Well, in the book, we followed in parallel a man who's a good example of that.

He was one of our least happy men, and we deliberately followed him as another Harvard student to compare him with Leo.

His name was John, and he was quite a prominent lawyer.

Growing up, he lost his mother to illness when he was 13, and then he didn't feel like he fit in very well in school or at university, but he went to a very good law school.

He got a very good job first with the government, and then in a fancy law firm, and he won awards.

But he had one marriage that wasn't very happy, not a very good relationship with his children, and then a second marriage which was even less happy.

He died very ill and very alone.

So he was a man who had lots of privilege, realized his aspirations, but really wasn't happy.

So on those two contrasting case studies, the guy who didn't get what he wanted but was happy with his life content, and the guy who externally ticked a lot of boxes but was unhappy, what's the conclusion you as a researcher draw from the data that those two examples are nested in?

Probably the biggest conclusion was about relationships with other people, and certainly that's what the scientific findings are, that the people who figure out a way to make good connections with others and to stay connected warmly to others, those are the people who are happiest and also stay the healthiest. And what happened was that Leo just naturally made and kept warm connections. John, on the other hand, did not.

Some of that probably had to do with childhood traumas.

But there are people who have difficult childhoods and end up making very good connections through their lives.

So the Harvard study shows that strong relationships are the key to happiness.

Does that mean that extroverts, you know, people who make social connections easily and enjoy having lots of people in their life, does that mean that they're automatically better set up for happiness?

It doesn't set us up for whether we're going to be happy or not.

So we're all on a spectrum.

Some of us are more introverted.

Some of us are more extroverted.

Most of us are kind of a mix.

And introversion is just as healthy as extroversion.

It introverts are people who need a lot of alone time.

That's how they refuel.

And a lot of people around are stressful, right, for introverts.
So what we are sure of is that introverts probably need at least one or two good, warm relationships.
They need to feel like there's somebody they can count on in the world.
But that's all the benefit they need for relationships
as opposed to extroverts who get refueled by being around a lot of other people.
You mentioned that many of the young men in the study
when it began served in the Second World War,
and I guess war would be one of the biggest examples of an external event crashing into your life
that you've got no control over and is automatically going to be incredibly traumatic, right?
Assume so.
Is that the kind of impact it had on these men,
their experiences being in war?
Was it a negative one in the years that followed?
Many people said it was a time of growth for them.
So some of them did experience trauma and had some post-traumatic stress symptoms.
But many of them said that they grew a lot as people,
that they learned to rely on other people, on their fellow soldiers,
that they were sustained by their connections with their fellow soldiers.
They were sustained by their connections with the people back home who wrote letters
and kept reminding them that they were at home waiting for them,
that there were a lot of ways in which war is obviously a traumatic experience for many people,
but that it was also a time of challenge and growth.
Leo had a long marriage, a good marriage.
How big a factor is that in the participants having a sort of solid relationship
in overall sense of living a good life, a happy life?
It's important to point out that these benefits of good relationships
don't have to come from marriage or from an intimate partnership.
And that's important because as we know many people are not partnered.
You can get these benefits from friendships, from other family relationships
and work relationships,
but marriage is a very important benefit
in that people who are married or partnered live longer
and they stay healthier probably because we have someone who reminds us to take our medicine,
someone who reminds us to eat at the right times, right?
Who we want to get up for and go out and do things with.
And so we find that having somebody who sort of keeps you kind of wanting to be in the world
is a great benefit.
Does it have to be a good marriage to have that positive benefit?
I mean, what if you're in an unhappy partnership?
Is it then a negative towards your health?
It is. It turns out it is a negative.
The research on really acrimonious partnerships says that it does,
it breaks down your health as well as your happiness
because the underlying ingredient here is stress or stress reduction.

So if you think about it, a good marriage or a good friendship, if you're having a terribly stressful day and you have somebody you can call or go home to and talk about your day, you can literally feel your body calm down. If you don't have anyone like that or if you go home to an acrimonious partner, an argumentative relationship, then the stress just continues. And what we believe from research is that chronic stress raises our levels of inflammation in the body.

It raises our levels of circulating stress hormones.

That breaks down many different body systems.

So that's why people who are lonely or in terrible relationships, chronically stressed, are more likely to get heart disease and type 2 diabetes and arthritis because it breaks down multiple body systems.

So loneliness is actually a health risk, not just a psychological one.

Absolutely. And it's a risk for mental decline as well as physical decline.

So actually lonely people have mental decline earlier and more severely than people who are not lonely.

When you give the example of a really acrimonious relationship, I guess that's on one end of a spectrum.

But as your researchers at Harvard returned to these participants again and again, and I guess sometimes they were having good years in their relationships and bad years in their relationships,

is there any prediction you can make about if there's times of strife or difficulty?

Does that mean things are doomed with a partner?

It does not mean that they're doomed.

And what we find is that good relationships that are important are never completely smooth.

We always have differences with the important people in our lives.

We have conflicts.

So the question is what predicts which of those relationships are going to be good and which are not?

And what we found, we actually brought couples into our laboratory and we asked them to argue with each other.

And we set it up.

We said, argue about something you usually argue about.

It might be kids or housework or something.

And we videotaped them and they soon forgot about the videotape and they just launched into their argument.

And then we had untrained observers watch those videotapes and then we asked, can we predict which relationships are basically good and going to remain stable and which are going to break up?

And it turned out it wasn't the degree of anger during the argument or the intensity of the argument at all.

It was whether you could, watching these people argue, still see affection and respect within the couple.

And that's what we seem to find, that if a relationship has that bedrock of affection and respect even

in difficulties,
those are the relationships that confer these benefits and that last.
So you're saying that the research is showing that connections with other people,
whether it's a partner or a friend or a workmate, they're all really vital in keeping us emotionally and
physically well.
But what about the huge challenge to our connection posed by our digital world, our screens,
our distraction that's happening all the time?
What impact does that have on the quality of the kind of time we spend with one another?
Yeah.
Well, like everything in my research, it depends.
So there is now research from a psychologist, Gene Twenge, and there's other research as well,
suggesting that it is how we use our digital tools that makes a difference in whether we're healthier
or less healthy.
So what we find is that if we passively use digital media and social media,
if we scroll through other people's Instagram feeds, for example,
that that lowers our well-being, it lowers our self-esteem, raises our levels of depression and anxiety.
We think it's because what we're doing, if I look at somebody else's photos of their great parties and
their wonderful vacations,
it looks like they're having their best life and I sometimes wake up feeling lost or depressed
or like I just want to go back to bed and get under the covers, right?
But I don't post those photos of myself, right?
So we're watching other people's curated lives.
If we do that, it makes us do what one of my teachers said.
He said, we're always comparing our insides to other people's outsides.
And if we do that in using the digital world, we get more depressed, more anxious and we feel worse
about ourselves.
But if we connect actively with other people, if we use social media, say, to find other people who
have a similar interest
or have a similar physical disability that they're working with, right?
That it can go so far to make us feel good, to make us feel connected,
like we belong, that that active use of social media makes us feel better.
Podcast. Broadcast. And online.
This is Conversations with Sarah Konoski.
Find out more about the Conversations podcast.
Just head to abc.net.au-conversations.
So the key finding, Bob, is that strong relationships are at the heart of a good life.
Did you see participants who were able to change the way they lived to prioritise relationships,
like men who'd been lonely or isolated or focused, say, on work rather than their family or their
friends?
Are people able to change that orientation?
They are. They are.
The last chapter in the book is called It's Never Too Late.
And there's a story in that chapter about a man who never prioritised relationships
and he had a distant marriage, not great relationships with his kids.

And then when he retired, he joined a gym and when he went to the gym, he found a group of friends

for the first time in his life and he reported to the study.

He said, for the first time, I feel like I have a group of friends.

We don't just go to the gym together. We go to films together.

We play sport together. We do things together.

And so in my 60s, for the first time, I have friends.

It's that phrase, it's never too late to have a happy childhood.

How does that fit in your experience?

If someone hasn't had that support at an early age,

is it something that they're able to find as they mature?

Many of our people did.

So one of the things we found was that trauma in childhood is terrible,

both for the traumatic events but also for that legacy it leaves.

It teaches the child that people aren't reliable,

that the people who are supposed to be able to help you won't help you and they might hurt you.

So if you emerge from childhood with those expectations,

can they ever be corrected?

And what we found was that some people found friends,

found romantic partners who treated them well,

who led them to realize, oh, there are people I can count on.

There are people who won't hurt me, who will help me when I need it.

And so we think of them, we call them corrective experiences

in the psychological world.

And it's corrective experiences really are possible.

You mentioned earlier that it's unusual, the Harvard study,

in how people agree to continue participating,

that it doesn't have the drop-off rate that you might expect with a study

that is sort of very demanding of its participants.

Why do you think that is?

Why did these men and now their wives and kids agree

to keep on answering all of these questions about themselves?

We think a lot of it has to do with the fact that we were not a hands-off study.

If we were doing the purest, most rigorous study we could,

I would never have met any of the participants.

I would never speak to any of the participants.

We would be at arm's length so that we didn't influence

what our participants thought or felt or what they told us.

My predecessors decided to do it differently.

So actually, the study coordinators were often these lovely women

who were kind of motherly.

And so they would develop relationships with these originally young men.

And they would, you know, we send them birthday cards.

We send them thank you notes when they return questionnaires.
If people come to us asking for a physician or asking for a psychologist,
we find them one.
I think the original investigators sometimes loaned people money
who needed help to go through a hard time.
Now that is forbidden in the rigorous, very anxious about this.
So we decided not to be a hands-off study,
but the consequence we think is that we've built a sense of community.
What we have said to people is you are giving a gift to science
that no one else can give because we can't bring in new people
because we don't have that backlog of information that we have on each of these people.
So they are unique.
If someone drops out, we can't replace them.
So that's why we do what we do.
How did the participants reflect on their own involvement in the study?
What sort of things do they say about the impact it's had on their life?
We asked them.
We said, how has being in the study affected you?
And some people say it hasn't affected me at all.
Some people say your questions are a nuisance and I hate them.
But most people said your study has made a big difference in how I think about my own life
because I knew that every so often you were going to come back to me
with a set of questions about my life.
And because I knew that, I started thinking more,
well, how is my life going?
And how am I doing?
And how am I making choices?
So we know that we were affecting the lives of the people we were studying.
So an enforced kind of reflection time.
Are they allowed to see their files, Bob?
They are not.
And no one else is allowed to see their files.
So often the children will say, can I see my mom and dad's files?
And we have to say, no, we're sorry.
But just as we will never show your files to anyone,
we can't show your parents' files to you.
We have to keep things absolutely confidential
so that people will tell us private information.
So one of the impacts on your life of being involved in this study
was the decision to have three weeks holiday
or three weeks trip to Australia when you came out.
Are there any other ways that being familiar
with the results of this study have shaped the way you're living?
Yes, yes.

It's made me change the way I conduct my relationships.
So I'm a Harvard professor.
I could work 24-7, right?
There's always a paper to be read.
You're probably expected to work 24-7.
I'm probably expected to work so hard.
And I realized, you know, I could work 24-7,
especially since my kids are grown.
When they were at home,
they'd always be coming in saying,
dad, do this with me or drive me here.
And that was good.
It dragged me away.
And that was good.
And my wife felt the same.
And then we realized that because we love our work,
we could work nonstop now that the kids aren't home.
And I realized that I could wake up one day
and say, I'm one of those people who wake up and say,
I don't have any friends.
So I started being much more active
in reaching out to my friends.
Now I schedule walks.
I schedule going for coffee.
I schedule dinners with my friends
in a way that I didn't used to.
And have you noticed the benefit of that?
Oh, yes.
Oh, yes.
Just the little small actions of reaching out
make a huge difference.
And some of, especially my male friends,
say, well, usually my wife makes the social plans
for both of us.
But yes, I'll go have dinner with you.
And then we have a great time, just the two of us.
If back in the day,
Harvard Research had visited your family home
to ask about the kind of life that you were living
and the kind of family you were in,
what would they have noticed?
Well, they would have noticed
a very traditional 1950s kind of home.
My mom was a homemaker.

My father went off to work each day.
He was a businessman and they had two children.
And we grew up in a small Midwestern city, Des Moines, Iowa.
We went to the local schools.
And it was a very predictable childhood.
And now I consider myself lucky.
One of my sons came back from university,
where he met many different kids from very different backgrounds.
He said, you know, mom and dad,
I've had a pretty boring childhood.
And my wife and I say, thank you.
That's what we want to hear.
So I think probably I had a relatively boring childhood.
And by that, I mean, I was lucky.
No big traumas.
And a lot of that is luck, you know,
because we can't help a lot of the things that happen to us.
Was your family religious?
They were.
I was raised Jewish.
And my parents were really involved
in the small Jewish community in Des Moines, Iowa.
And I was very involved in the Jewish youth group there.
And that was the center of our life.
The synagogue was the community center of my family's life.
I was very involved in school and active in school,
but they were outside of the home and work.
They really centered their lives around the Jewish community.
What did you find out in later years
about the very practical way they helped in that community?
Your mom and dad.
Oh, well, we found out some things after they died.
We went through old letters and old documents
and I would find thank you notes from people,
thanking them for supporting them during hard times.
I found out that my father had for many years
supported a widow and her young child
because she couldn't make ends meet on her very low paying job.
I had no idea.
I mean, I knew these people,
but my father never let on that he was doing this.
My mother supported some young women
who were going through challenging times
and we read letters after my mom died.

That must have been such a lovely discovery to make.
It was so moving to realize that your parents
had done these things that you never knew about.
Were your mom and dad different kinds of personalities?
Well, they were of different political parties.
Oh, really?
But that was a day when you could be in a different political party
and be in a perfectly harmonious family.
So my mother voted for John Kennedy
and my father voted for Richard Nixon in 1960.
Did they talk about politics?
No.
It was just understood.
My father watched the news.
It was just understood and there wasn't this sense of division.
I mean, it was very much a sense
that people could have differences of opinion
and that was just the norm.
Now, it's much more likely in the U.S.
that people don't want their children
to marry someone of a different political persuasion.
It's okay to marry someone of a different race
or a different religion,
but a different political persuasion is taboo.
Guess who's coming to dinner, but it's like a Republican.
Exactly, exactly.
How sociable was your dad, Bob?
What are your memories of him in that way?
Well, my father would talk to anyone
and sometimes it would embarrass my mother
because my mother was a little more proper.
My dad would just sit and talk to taxi drivers
and get their whole life story
and he'd talk to wait staff and it was really fun.
I mean, he was just endlessly curious about people
and I think I inherited that from him because there's a reason
why I'm a psychiatrist.
You get to talk to people about their lives all day long
and there's a reason why I fell in love
with this longitudinal study.
So was it always your idea
that you'd go on to medicine and psychiatry?
How did that happen?
No, that was a total accident.

My dad went to law school
and so I thought, well, I'd like to be a lawyer
and then I got to university
and I realized I have no idea what a lawyer does
and I actually have no interest in the law
and I liked science.
So I decided, well, let me try medicine
because it's helping people.
I had no intention of becoming a psychiatrist.
I didn't know any psychiatrist growing up
and I was scared of mental illness
and then I realized in medical school
that psychiatry was fascinating
and that I love talking to people about their lives
and how their thinking was doing
and so I completely changed
what I thought I was going to become.
You met the co-author of this book,
Mark Schultz, when you were both working
at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center.
What kind of place was that?
Well, that was a community mental health center
in one of Boston's poorest neighborhoods.
So these were people who were the most disadvantaged,
often chronically psychotic, wandering the streets
and so Mass Mental Health Center
was not just a place where they came for treatment.
They sat in the lobby.
I mean, these were people who sat in the lobby
of the health center all day every day.
We greeted them, they greeted us.
We had day programs for them,
but many of them were just,
some of them stood and opened the door
for people as they went in and out.
It was a kind of lovable community.
Did you feel like your training in psychiatry
equipped you to be in that kind of setting
and work with those sorts of people?
It was challenging because, ironically,
I trained at a hospital that was a private psychiatric hospital.
So then to go to this very public, often dirty institution,
I mean, it was hard to keep the place clean.
Pigeons would fly into my office windows

because the windows didn't close,
the heating often didn't work.
But I found that there was something so down to earth
about the staff and the patients that I loved it.
Did it give you a different understanding
of what your role as a psychiatrist was?
Yes, yes, because it was,
my role was to help people with the resources that they had.
So I couldn't get in there and take away poverty.
I couldn't take away racial discrimination.
But what I could do was help them to make what they could
of what they had and find them the resources
that we could find for them.
And so rather than settling into despair, which you could do,
my teachers helped me to see,
no, no, no, these people are living lives that they value
and we can help them make their lives better.
How did you first come across Zen Buddhism, Bob?
Well, that was by accident.
So my son, my younger son had a friend,
he was 13 years old and he was having a ceremony,
a coming of age ceremony at a church near my house.
So we went to the friend's ceremony
and the mother knew that I was interested in Buddhism.
So she pointed to the minister and said,
he's a Zen master.
So I got in touch with him afterwards and said,
could I come meet with you?
And he was this lovely down-to-earth man who was funny
and not at all holier than thou.
And I just, he said,
well, maybe you'd like to try sitting with our meditation group.
And so I started sitting with the group, studying with him.
And 17 years later, I'm actually a Zen master now myself.
There are lots of flavors of meditation
that people might encounter in the West.
What's the Zen style?
Well, Zen originated in China and Japan
and it is a kind of mix of Japanese and Chinese philosophy,
Taoism, Confucianism and Indian Buddhism.
And so it emphasizes simplicity
and it emphasizes being present for whatever comes up in our lives.
What that means is that in Zen meditation,
we don't search for any special states of mind.

We don't try to get rid of thoughts at all.
Thoughts are not the enemy.
We just strive to be present for whatever is here right now.
And I find that very helpful.
So in Zen, the saying goes, we are already Buddhas.
We just have to recognize it.
And Zen practice helps us recognize how we are already awakened.
Having grown up in a Jewish family
where the synagogue was such an important part of your life,
how does your Jewishness fit with your Zen Buddhism?
Well, I love being Jewish.
I love Jewish food and Jewish holidays.
In fact, when we go home,
we're going to celebrate the Jewish high holidays,
the Jewish New Year.
And Buddhism doesn't believe,
God isn't part of the picture in Buddhism.
There's no deity.
What that means is Buddhism is compatible with any other religion.
So there's no competition there.
So if you go to a Buddhist teacher,
they won't say to you,
you have to give up your current religious practice.
Not at all.
So I'm particularly compelled by Buddhist philosophy,
the idea of connection with everything
rather than an isolated self,
the idea that everything is always changing.
And so for me, that resonates a lot.
What does your Zen practice mean
for the way you practice psychiatry
and the way you relate to the patients you see clinically?
It has definitely influenced my practice.
So Zen is very existential.
Zen is always reminding us,
life is short, we are eventually going to die.
And it sounds gloomy,
but it turns out that it makes us happier
to have that orientation.
It makes us savor life while we have it.
And so what I find in my practice
is that I often ask people to step back
from whatever they're struggling with right now
and think about, well, how does this fit

into the bigger picture of your life?
For example, if someone's struggling with something,
I think, how will you look back on this five years from now?
And many times people will stop and say,
well, actually this won't look very important.
Maybe I don't need to worry so much about this,
or maybe I can emphasize something else.
And so I think this kind of bigger picture perspective,
which Zen practice gives me,
is something that I bring to my work with patients.
Are there parallels, Bob,
between what you understand about life and meaning
and happiness through Zen and the research
in this Harvard study of adult development?
There are parallels.
So we ask people questions about why they get up in the morning.
What is the meaning in your life?
What is your purpose in life?
And Zen asks a lot about that.
Now, what Zen talks about is kindness and compassion,
and that those are aspirations that really make our lives better.
In our research, we don't tell people
what their aspirations might helpfully be,
but we ask them, what do you aspire to?
What do you care the most about?
What are your values?
And I'm sure I would not be asking those questions.
Were it not for my Zen practice?
And the emphasis that the Harvard study gives
on turning up fully to our relationships,
that seems to fit very well with Zen as well,
from the way you're describing it.
Absolutely.
This idea that when we pay attention,
when we face toward our lives
and the challenges in our lives, life goes better.
We've actually studied that.
So we studied people who,
we all have our usual coping mechanisms with difficulty,
and every life has difficulty.
And so we studied the people who tended to turn away from difficulty
and just maybe hope it's going to go away
or pretend it's not happening.
And then we looked at the people who turned toward difficulty saying,

okay, here it is.
What can I do?
How can I solve this?
How can I cope?
And what we found was that the people who turned toward difficulties
by far did better in their lives.
They met challenges better.
They had happier lives.
And that's what Zen practice asks us to do in meditation
is turn toward everything that comes up,
including the difficult things.
In 2015, you gave a TED Talk on this Harvard study
into happiness.
And it went crazy.
It went viral.
I think that top 10 TED Talks of all time, apparently,
made it resonate.
How do you understand that huge connection it had with people,
apart from your talent and good look and charm?
Yes.
What else was it?
Somebody said to me, Bob, it didn't go viral
because you're a beautiful blonde.
No.
No, it's not that.
I think it's actually one of my colleagues said,
that some of the things that go viral
are the things that take something that we know in our gut
and they move that awareness up 18 inches into our brains.
It puts it out there.
And so I think what the TED Talk did was it took this thing
that we sort of already knew that, my gosh, relationships
are so important in helping us get through life.
And it brought it right out into the forefront and said,
here it is.
Here's what science shows us.
Look at this.
And I think that's what made it go viral.
You find people coming up to you after classes or at conferences
and saying, Dr. Bob, please tell me how to be happy.
It's something you do scientifically,
but I guess there's this hunger that we have as a species
of how do we do this thing called life?
Are we meant to proceed?

Yeah, and that's why we wrote the book
because we put in so much science about what works
and what doesn't work.
And again, when people come up and ask me that,
it's very difficult because, again, one size doesn't fit all.
There are so many ways to go through life
and so many ways to be happy.
We do know ways that work better and ways that work less well.
So for example, accepting the fact of change helps.
So accepting that life is going to bring me challenges,
accepting that my relationships are going to change.
My partner is going to change in ways that I don't expect.
And as we say, going with the flow,
trying to be flexible and adaptive in the face of constant change
in all phases of our life,
that that works better than resisting and saying,
I insist that things never change.
That doesn't work very well.
It's curious to imagine going back to that initial group of young men
in 1938 who were 19,
I can't think that there would have been too many of them
who would have thought,
I think the lesson my life will lead to people drawing is,
go with the flow, relax more.
It's interesting, isn't it?
That stage of life where we think it's all about doing and achieving
and making a mark,
and it's quite the opposite in the long term.
Yes, and also I think there are phases of life.
So young adulthood really is a time where we need
we need to do certain things.
We need to know,
am I ever going to find a partner?
Am I ever going to find work that's meaningful to me?
How do I make a life?
So I think in that way,
that sense of needing to establish myself is real for young adults
and not to be dismissed.
And so I think some of our priorities appropriately change
as we move through life.
So the study is in its wise elder phase now.
Yeah.
I think it's the third generation that the study is on too.
I mean, how long might it continue?

Do you think?

Well, we're still going.

We're still collecting data,

even as we speak on our second generation.

And we'll see.

I mean, the jury is out about how much longer we're going to continue.

The problem with doing the third generation, the grandchildren,

is that our youngest grandchild is probably six years old.

Our oldest grandchild is in their fifties.

So how do you even think about a generational study?

What question do you ask a six-year-old and a 50-year-old

that's relevant to both, right?

Are you ticklish?

Are you ticklish?

Exactly.

That's it.

That's what we'll do.

It's really fascinating and strangely reassuring to hear

that all of those 85 years of Harvard science tell us,

make time for your relationships and nurture them.

Yeah.

It's lovely to meet you, Bob.

Thank you for being my guest on Conversation.

Well, this has been a pleasure.

You have increased my happiness during this hour.

Udonic and hedonic.

Both.

Both.

You've been listening to a podcast of Conversations with Sarah Kanoski.

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